№ 2127.298

GIVEN BY
Skinner Fund.

on Public Library

or mark with pen or

the

OF READING BOOKS

OF READING BOOKS

BY

JOHN LIVINGSTON LOWES

2127.298

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1929

C

4323

COPYRIGHT, 1929, BY JOHN LIVINGSTON LOWES

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

Skinner
Oct. 7. 1929

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

PREFACE

THE Address (to use the term of fashion and ceremony) which follows is reprinted by request from the two College journals which in due course published it. It was meant to be informal, and its colloquial turn has been retained. *Sermoni propriora* — even perhaps in the sense of Charles Lamb's wicked rendering, 'properer for a sermon' — fits its case, and to starch its style would be to change its kind. What it is, it is, and must so remain.

Thanks are due to the *Simmons College Review* and *The Radcliffe Quarterly* for courteous permission to reprint it.

J. L. L.

May, 1929

OF READING BOOKS
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
AT SIMMONS COLLEGE
June 9, 1924
and
AT RADCLIFFE COLLEGE
June 18, 1924

OF READING BOOKS

THE text (if I may call it so) of what I mean to say is this: 'I hope, y-wis, to rede . . . som day.' Which, translated into the vernacular, means: 'I hope to Heaven that some day I'll get a chance to *read*.' That pious hope is part of a line of Chaucer, and unless I much mistake, it finds an ardent response in the minds of scores of us to-day, who find ourselves caught in the toils of a more restless and exigent century than his. And what I propose to say about reading — whether it be for delight, or for information, or for something deeper still — must, if it is to have any value, take into account conditions which all save a few happy mortals are destined to meet.

I

For we live in an age and a land above all things marked by hurried motion. I happened to come from Pittsburgh to New York the other day, at the rate of fifty miles an hour. Every few minutes another train flashed by in the opposite direction. On a hundred thousand miles of rails the same flying shuttles were hurtling back and forth. The taxi which took me

from one station to another in New York was numbered (they know better now) one million seven hundred thousand and odd, and the other million or so were trying simultaneously to hurl themselves along the streets. And under the street, packed trains, a couple of minutes or so apart, were crashing back and forth in the din of steel on steel flung back from walls of stone. My neighbour in the smoking-car that morning was manfully ploughing his way through a Gargantuan Sunday paper. My eye caught a page-wide headline in one of those instructive sections which temper the comic supplement to the inquiring spirit: 'Power enough in a glass of water to drive an ocean liner.' And I wondered how far and how fast, when science had done its worst, our harmless necessary glass of water in the morning might one day drive us! A sip before breakfast here in Boston, and in an instant, if we will it, we are catapulted to Chicago. Why not? That is the logical goal of our endeavours. The word of the hour is the word of my headline — 'drive.' To carry on the business of college, church, or hospital, we initiate a 'drive.' Even in religion, education, and philanthropy we tend to think and act in terms of energy translated into tense and often fevered motion.

The thing meets us everywhere. 'In a weekly paper not very long ago' — and now I am quoting William James — 'I remember reading a story in which, after describing the beauty and interest of the heroine's personality, the author summed up her charms by saying that to all who looked upon her an impression as of "bottled lightning" was irresistibly conveyed. Bottled lightning, in truth,' William James goes on, 'is one of our American ideals, even of a young girl's character!' That was twenty-five years ago. To-day, be they masculine or feminine, we dub such persons dynamos. And the human dynamo is fast becoming our ideal.

Matthew Arnold saw all this coming — saw it, indeed, already well under way — much more than fifty years ago. 'O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,' he cries in his *Scholar-Gipsy*,

> And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;
> Before *this strange disease of modern life*,
> *With its sick hurry, its divided aims*,
> *Its heads o'ertax'd, its palsied hearts*, was rife —
> Fly hence, our contact fear! . . .

And he continues:

> But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!
> For strong is the infection of our mental strife.

And in these last lines Arnold puts his finger on the core of the malady, so far as we are concerned. For this tension in which to-day we live and move and have our being is contagious. And there Matthew Arnold is at one with William James, in that wise discourse on which I have already drawn — his talk to students on 'The Gospel of Relaxation': 'The American overtension and jerkiness and breathlessness and intensity,' he declares, 'are primarily social . . . phenomena. They are *bad habits* . . . bred of custom and example.' And you know, and I know, that high tension *is* contagious, and that we move in an atmosphere charged with energy driving at action, which sets us driving too, whether we are geared to anything or not. And we are helpless, unless — but that is to anticipate. And now I come back for a moment to Arnold again:

> But we, brought forth and rear'd in hours
> Of change, alarm, surprise —
> What shelter to grow ripe is ours?
> What leisure to grow wise?
>
> Like children bathing on the shore,
> Buried a wave beneath,
> The second wave succeeds, before
> We have had time to breathe.

Too fast we live, too much are tried,
Too harass'd, to attain
Wordsworth's sweet calm, or Goethe's wide
And luminous view to gain.

And that brings us within sight of our theme.

For one of the consequences of this modern malady of ours is that the gracious things which lend to life and human intercourse the beauty of serenity and comeliness are gone, or on the wane. 'The wisdom of a learned man,' wrote the author of Ecclesiasticus long centuries ago, 'cometh by opportunity of leisure,' and not wisdom only, but grace, and gentle breeding, and amenity, and poise come so, and only so. And leisure (which is not to be confused with empty time, but which is time through which free, life-enhancing currents flow) — leisure in these days is something to be sought and cherished as a rare and priceless boon; leisure to think, and talk, and write, and read — lost arts else, all of them. 'John Wesley's conversation is good,' said Dr. Johnson to Boswell once, 'but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do.' The sainted John Wesley in the rôle of a modern 'hustler' is a little humorous, and

Samuel Johnson did a certain amount of work himself. But an age that loved, on occasion, to fold its legs, and have its talk out, and its book out, and its delightful familiar letters out, may not have been one hundred per cent efficient (in our devastating modern phrase), but it did have shelter to grow ripe, and it did have leisure to grow wise, and more than our own driving, restless period, it did possess its soul. 'He hasteth well,' wrote Chaucer, whom business could not make dull, 'who wisely can abide,' and we first learn to live when we

> . . . claim not every laughing Hour
> For handmaid to [our] striding power . . .
> To usher for a destined space
> (*Her own sweet errands all forgone*)
> The too imperious traveller on.

'We are great fools,' says Montaigne: '"He spends his life in idleness," we say, "I've *done* nothing to-day." What! Have you not *lived?* That is not only the most fundamental, but the most illustrious of your occupations.'

Our salvation, then, lies in the refusal to be forever hurried with the crowd, and in our resolution to step out of it at intervals, and drink from deeper wells. 'Il se faut reserver une arrière boutique, toute nostre, toute franche' —

'we ought to reserve for ourselves an *arrière boutique*, a back-shop, all our own, all free, in which we may set up our own true liberty and principal retreat and solitude.' That is Montaigne's ripe, leisured wisdom, and in that *arrière boutique* the wish: 'I hope, y-wis, to rede . . . som day,' may find accomplishment. And so I mean to talk for a little while, most informally and most unacademically, about reading — a subject which, partly through our fault, I fear, some of you have come to think of in terms of courses and degrees, but which is infinitely bigger than all that. It is not even scholarship that I shall have in mind. It is simply reading, as men and women have always read, for the delight of it, and for the consequent enriching and enhancement of one's life. I have put delight deliberately first, for the rest, I believe, is contingent upon that. 'In general,' said Goethe once, 'we learn from what we love.' And I propose first of all to exhibit some lovable readers — not a Professor or even a Doctor in the lot, I think — and allow them to speak for themselves. And first, then, reading for the sheer delight of it.

II

'In anything fit to be called by the name of reading,' says Stevenson in his delectable *Gossip on Romance*,

> the process itself should be absorbing and voluptuous; we should gloat over a book, be rapt clean out of ourselves, and rise from the perusal, our mind filled with the busiest, kaleidoscopic dance of images, incapable of sleep or of continuous thought. It was for this . . . that we read so closely, and loved our books so dearly, in the bright, troubled period of boyhood. . . . We dug blithely after a certain sort of incident, like a pig for truffles. For my part, I liked a story to begin with an old wayside inn where, toward the close of the 'year 17—,' several gentlemen in three-cocked hats were playing bowls. A friend of mine preferred the Malabar coast in a storm, with a ship beating to windward, and a scowling fellow of Herculean proportions striding along the beach —

and so on delightfully. Now it is that unquenchable, bubbling zest on which I wish for the moment to insist, and Stevenson's is the gusto of 'the bright, troubled period of boyhood.' Let us set beside it, as is fitting, its companion piece. 'But, my dearest Catherine' — and need I say that it is the immortal and adorable Jane Austen who is speaking —

> 'But, my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all this morning? Have you gone on with "Udolpho"?'

'Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.'

'Are you indeed? How delightful! Oh, I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are you not wild to know?'

'Oh! yes, quite; what can it be? But do not tell me. I would not be told upon any account. I know it must be a skeleton; I am sure it is Laurentina's skeleton. Oh, I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it, I assure you; if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world.'

'Dear creature, how much I am obliged to you! and when you have finished "Udolpho," we will read "The Italian" together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you.'

'Have you indeed? How glad I am! What are they all?'

'I will read you their names directly. Here they are, in my pocket-book: "Castle of Wolfenbach," "Clermont," "Mysterious Warnings," "Necromancer of the Black Forest," "Midnight Bell," "Orphan of the Rhine," and "Horrid Mysteries." Those will last us some time.'

'Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?'

'Yes, quite sure; for a particular friend of mine, a Miss Andrews, a sweet girl, one of the sweetest creatures in the world, has read every one of them.'

Well, that is the meat upon which your inveterate readers are apt to have fed in childhood, and happy are you, if you have been

caught at it young. For romances, and stories of giants, magicians, and genii, read with a child's quick and plastic imagination, are stepping-stones to later, deeper, if no more enduring loves. 'I read through all gilt-cover little books that could be had at that time,' wrote Coleridge to Tom Poole in those precious fragments of an autobiography,

> and likewise all the uncovered tales of Tom Hickathrift, Jack the Giant Killer, and the like. And I used to lie by the wall, and mope; and my spirits used to come upon me suddenly and in a flood — and then I was accustomed to run up and down the churchyard, and act over again all I had been reading on the docks, the nettles, and the rank grass. At six years of age . . . I found the Arabian Nights' Entertainments . . . and I distinctly recollect the anxious and fearful eagerness with which I used to watch the window where the book lay, and when the sun came upon it, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, and bask, and read. . . . My whole being was, with eyes closed to every object of present sense, to crumple myself up in a sunny corner, and read, read, read.

I know there are those to whom all this is heresy, and who would feed children pedagogically desiccated food. There have always been such earnest and misguided souls. Charles Lamb has a gloriously volcanic outburst, in a letter to Coleridge, about Mrs. Barbauld's edify-

ing books for children — Mrs. Barbauld, who objected to *The Ancient Mariner* because it was improbable, and who rushed in where angels fear to tread with *An Address to the Deity*:

> I am glad [he writes] the snuff and Pi-pos's books please. 'Goody Two Shoes' is almost out of print. Mrs. Barbauld's stuff has banished all the old classics of the nursery. . . . Knowledge insignificant and vapid as Mrs. B's books convey, it seems, must come to a child in the *shape* of *knowledge*, and his empty noddle must be turned with conceit of his own powers when he has learnt that a Horse is an animal, and Billy is better than a Horse, and such like: instead of that beautiful Interest in wild tales which made the child a man, while all the time he suspected himself to be no bigger than a child. Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of children than with men. Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with Tales and old wives' fables in childhood, you had been crammed with geography and natural history!
>
> Damn them! [The Bowdlerizing editors print 'Hang them' — but Lamb was righteously indignant, and did *not* write 'Hang'] — I mean the cursed Barbauld Crew, those Blights and Blasts of all that is Human in man and child.

That at least cannot be charged with ambiguity, but Lamb expressed himself again — this time with reference to a girl's reading:

She was tumbled early [he is writing of Bridget Elia, who was Mary Lamb], by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage. Had I twenty girls, they should be brought up exactly in this fashion. I know not whether their chance in wedlock might not be diminished by it; but I can answer for it that it makes (if the worst come to the worst) most incomparable old maids.

On that point I venture no opinion, but the doctrine of the rest is sound.

Now I have dwelt on this seemingly irrelevant theme of early reading, because the element of delight is the point I wish just now to emphasize, and that eager, childlike zest, once caught, is seldom lost. There is no essential difference, for example, between Coleridge's absorption in the 'Arabian Nights,' and the irrepressible gusto with which John Keats read Shakespeare. Here is a bit of a letter which Keats wrote from Burford Bridge, one moonlit night, while he was deep in the composition of *Endymion*:

One of the three books I have with me is Shakespeare's Poems: I never found so many beauties in the Sonnets — they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally — in the intensity of working out conceits. Is this to be borne? Hark ye!

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the head,
And Summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly head.

He has left nothing to say about nothing or anything: for look at snails — you know what he says about Snails — you know when he talks about 'cockled Snails' — well, in one of these sonnets, he says — the chap slips into — no! I lie! this is in the *Venus and Adonis*: the simile brought it to my Mind.

As the snail, whose tender horns being hit,
Shrinks back into his shelly cave with pain. . . .

He overwhelms a genuine Lover of poesy with all manner of abuse, talking about —

'a poet's rage
And stretched metre of an antique song.'

Which, by the bye, will be a capital motto for my poem, won't it? . . . By the Whim-King! I'll give you a stanza —

and at once he is off creating! That is Keats through and through — the Keats who went 'ramping' (as Cowden Clarke put it) through the *Faerie Queene*; who 'hoisted himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, "What an image that is — *sea-shouldering whales*"'; who wrote, the night he first opened Chapman's Homer: 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies When a new planet swims into his ken.'

I always think, when I read in Keats's letters the things he says about his books, of those lines in *Ruth*:

> Before me shone a glorious world —
> Fresh as a banner bright, unfurled
> To music suddenly.

I have known, *you* know, men and women — busy men and women, too — to whom a book still means that. It is the very spirit of Miranda's cry:

> O wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
> That has such people in't!

And I envy any one to whom for the first time — or for the hundredth time — the brave new world of books is opening, that world which has such people in it: Cleopatra, Mr. Pickwick, Helen of Troy, Samuel Pepys, the Wife of Bath, Sir John Falstaff, Mrs. Proudie, Sir Willoughby Patterne, Becky Sharp, Perdita, Pantagruel, Mephistopheles, Launcelot, Dido, and a thousand others more alive than you and I. 'I doe nothing without blithenesse,' wrote Montaigne in his essay on 'Books' — and if I were going to that famous desert island for which we

are periodically asked to select our five-foot shelf, Montaigne in his pithy, sinewy, succulent French would be almost the first whom I should pick — 'Je ne fay rien sans gayeté'; and no mortal ever went adventuring more blithely among books than Michael Montaigne, or brought home richer treasure-trove.

'But,' you will say to me, 'we haven't time.' I know it; very few of us these days have time — those least, I sometimes think, who have it most. But even if, being modern, and ambitious, and efficient, and all that, we are whirled along with our fellow atoms in the rush, we shall not be losing time if now and then we pause, and loaf (I wish the fine phrase had not been worn so trite), loaf, and invite our souls. And if you worship in the temple of efficiency, don't forget — and again I am drawing on the wise humanity of William James — that 'just as a bicycle chain may be too tight, so may one's carefulness and conscientiousness be so tense as to hinder the running of one's mind.' And after all, the smooth, free running of one's mind is fairly important to the precious efficiency of whatever machinery it be that your particular intelligence helps to run. Even as a business proposition (to fall again into the jargon of the day), time spent

in unclamping our mental processes is time won, and not time lost.

And the thing is possible. Here is part of a letter which Matthew Arnold wrote to his sister. And Arnold, being a hard-driven public official, knew whereof he spoke.

> If I were you, my dear Fan, I should now take to some regular reading, if it were only an hour a day. It is the best thing in the world to have something of this sort as a point in the day, and far too few people know and use this secret. You would have your district still, and all your business as usual, but you would have this hour in your day in the midst of it all, and it would soon become of the greatest solace to you.

There is none of us for whom, with occasional lapses, that is not possible. And the last thing on earth that I am suggesting is that this hour be made a task — something to which we bind ourselves, with grim conscientiousness, as to one relentless duty more. I am not forgetting that I am still speaking of reading for the sheer delight of it, and to come down to cases is worth considerably more than further homiletics. This, from a letter of Edward Fitzgerald, is the sort of thing I mean:

> Here is a glorious sunshiny day: all the morning I read about Nero in Tacitus, lying at full length on a

bench in the garden: a nightingale singing, and some red anemones eyeing the sun manfully not far off. A funny mixture all this: Nero and the delicacy of spring: all very human however.

Well, it *is* human, and the sort of reading which just now I have in mind is a creature not too bright and good even for human nature's daily food. Here is a passage in which William Hazlitt is talking of luxuriating in books:

I remember sitting up half the night to read *Paul and Virginia*, which I picked up at an inn at Bridgewater, after being drenched in the rain all day; and at the same place I got through two volumes of Madame D'Arblay's *Camilla*. It was on the 10th of April, 1798, that I sat down to a volume of the *New Eloise*, at the inn at Llangollen, over a bottle of sherry and a cold chicken.

And that delectable epicureanism is one of the marks of your true reader for delight — he remains a human being while he reads. There is Browning:

Then I went in-doors, brought out a loaf,
Half a cheese, and a bottle of Chablis;
Lay on the grass and forgot the oaf
Over a jolly chapter of Rabelais.

And here is Charles Lamb to Coleridge:

Observe, there comes to you, by the Kendal waggon to-morrow . . . a box, containing the Miltons, the strange American Bible . . . Baxter's *Holy Common-*

wealth, for which you stand indebted to me 3*s.* 6*d.*; an odd volume of Montaigne, being of no use to me, I having the whole; certain books belonging to Wordsworth, as do also the strange thick-hoofed shoes, which are very much admired at in London —

and there I must pause for a moment. For those thick-hoofed shoes are uncanny in their rich suggestiveness. They are Simon Lee and Goody Blake and the Idiot Boy and Peter Bell in a nutshell. And one of the fascinations of the letters — of Gray's inimitable raciness, of 'the divine chit-chat of Cowper,' as Coleridge calls it, of Lamb, Byron, Keats, Fitzgerald, Stevenson — one of the quintessential pleasures of the letters lies in their wealth of unexpected flashes: 'fine things said unintentionally,' as Keats said of the Sonnets. And now I return to Lamb and his box of books:

> If you find the Miltons in certain parts dirtied and soiled with a crumb of right Gloucester blacked in the candle (my usual supper), or peradventure a stray ash of tobacco wafted into the crevices, look to that passage more especially: depend upon it, it contains good matter.

Crumbs of toasted cheese and the ash of a pipe suggest, however, concomitant delights perhaps of scant appeal to certain readers. Well, then, here is Dorothy Wordsworth:

Worked hard, and read *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and ballads. Sauntered a little in the garden. The blackbird sate quietly in its nest, rocked by the wind, and beaten by the rain. . . . Sauntered a good deal in the garden, bound carpets, mended old clothes, read *Timon of Athens*, dried linen. . . . In the afternoon we sate by the fire; I read Chaucer aloud, and Mary read the first canto of the *Faerie Queene*. . . . We spent the morning in the orchard reading the *Epithalamium* of Spenser; walked backwards and forwards. . . . We sowed the scarlet beans in the orchard, and read *Henry V* there. After dinner William added one to the orchard steps. . . . A sunshiny morning. I walked to the top of the hill and sate under a wall . . . facing the sun. I read a scene or two in *As You Like It*. . . . Read part of *The Knight's Tale* with exquisite delight.

The Faerie Queene, the *Epithalamium*, *Henry V*, *As You Like It*, *The Knight's Tale*: those are the things that you 'take,' as if they were some academic whooping-cough or measles. And here, under no compulsion, is a woman reading them as if they'd actually been written to be *read* — reading them by the fire, in the orchard, on a hill-top under a wall in the sun — reading with exquisite delight. Heaven help us who teach, if through well-meant but sometimes misguided efforts to instruct, we have rubbed the bloom off the great books, and blunted the keen edge of pleasure such as that!

I have not the slightest intention in all this of implying that only the hundred best books, so to speak, will serve our purposes. Some of the most bewitching, completely captivating things in life lie buried in forgotten, relatively worthless books, if one has eyes to see them. An enterprising young friend of mine suggested in a letter that I had from him not long ago the alluring enterprise of an anthology of the *worst* poetry. I hope he will make it! For your true adventurer in 'the wide, wild wilderness of books' knows that often, as Browning has it, 'the worst turns the best for the brave.' 'I am going to repeat my old experiment,' Stevenson wrote in a letter to Sidney Colvin, 'after buckling to a while to write more correctly, lie down and have a wallow.' That is not elegant, but it is precise. And after one has wound up one's faculties, like Mrs. Battle, over serious things, one may indulge with propriety in what I suppose one may designate as a slumming expedition among books. I do not recommend it as a practice, but for occasional indulgence there are distinguished precedents. Macaulay, for instance, besides knowing the romances of a certain prolific Mrs. Meeke almost by heart, was devoted to the literary efforts of a Mrs. Kitty Cuthbertson — *Santo Sebastiano*,

or, the Young Protector, The Forest of Montalbano, The Romance of the Pyrenees, Adelaide, or, the Countercharm. And on the last page of his edition of *Santo Sebastiano* appears an elaborate computation of the number of fainting fits that occur in the course of the five volumes. Here they are:

Julia de Clifford	11
Lady Delamore	4
Lady Theodosia	4
Lord Glenbrook	2
Lord Delamore	2
Lady Enderfield	1
Lord Ashgrove	1
Lord St. Orville	1
Henry Mildmay	1 —

a total of 27. And here is a specimen of one of these catastrophes: 'One of the sweetest smiles that ever animated the face of mortal now diffused itself over the countenance of Lord St. Orville, as he fell at the feet of Julia in a death-like swoon.'

There is a volume entitled *A Spiritual Diary and Soliloquies* by a certain John Ruttey, M.D., which, Boswell informs us, diverted Dr. Johnson vastly — one of these priceless things on which one stumbles now and then, and which reward excursions off the beaten path. Here are a few of the worthy Quaker's entries:

Tenth month, 1753.
23. Indulgence in bed an hour too long.
Twelfth month, 17. An hypochondriac obnubilation from wind and indigestion.
Ninth month, 28. An over-dose of whiskey.
29. [Which was the day after the over-dose] A dull, cross, choleric day.
First month, 22. A little swinish at dinner and repast.
31. Dogged on provocation.
Second month, 5. Very dogged or snappish . . .
23. Dogged again.
Fourth month, 29. Mechanically and sinfully dogged.

And here is an unillustrious sheaf of my own, gleaned from one of the most absurd, yet seductive volumes ever penned, Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*. The following sentences fall within two paragraphs: 'Though this story was told in very plain language, it had particularly attracted Harley's notice; he had given it the tribute of some tears.' In the same paragraph an unfortunate Ophelia-like lady sings: 'There was a plaintive wildness in the air not to be withstood; and, except the keeper's, there was not an unmoistened eye around her.' After three more sentences: 'She stretched out her hand to Harley; he pressed it between both of his, and bathed it with his tears.' In the same paragraph: 'Harley looked on his ring. He put a couple of guineas into the man's hand: "Be kind to that

unfortunate." He burst into tears and left them.' A few pages later on: 'He laid his left hand on his heart — the sword dropped from his right — he burst into tears.' In the next paragraph: 'The desperation that supported her was lost; she fell to the ground, and bathed his feet with her tears.' In the following paragraph: 'Nature at last prevailed, he fell on her neck, and mingled his tears with hers.' On the next page: 'As he spoke these last words, his voice trembled in his throat; it was now lost in his tears.' A little later: 'The girl cried afresh; Harley kissed off her tears as they flowed, and wept between every kiss.' Finally: 'The old man now paused a moment to take breath. He eyed Harley's face; it was bathed with tears; the story was grown familiar to himself; *he dropped one tear, and no more.*' The exquisite economy of that solitary tear beggars admiration.

I am not, as you see, submitting a bibliography, or suggesting learned apparatus. For the moment we are concerned with reading for the sheer delight of it, when the world is all before us where to choose. But with delight there may be coupled something else. For one also reads to learn. And about that and one thing more, I shall be very brief.

III

Let me begin with a remark of Oliver Wendell Holmes:

> There are about as many twins in the births of thought as of children. For the first time in your lives you learn some fact or come across some idea. Within an hour, a day, a week, that same fact or idea strikes you from another quarter. . . . Yet no possible connection exists between the two channels by which the thought or the fact arrived. . . . And so it has happened to me and to every person, often and often, to be hit in rapid succession by these twinned facts or thoughts, as if they were linked like chain-shot.

Now all of us have had that experience, and it is apt to give us a curious sensation. 'Here,' we say, 'we've gone all our life without seeing that, and now all at once we see it at every turn. What does it mean?' Not long ago, for example, my attention was called for the first time, in a letter, to an international society of writers; two days later my eye caught a reference to it in a daily paper. Soon afterward I heard, for the first time to my knowledge, the name of a certain breed of terriers. Within a week I had come across the name in two different novels I was reading. What had happened? Simply this. I had doubtless seen both names time and again before, but nothing had ever stamped

them on my memory, and so when they turned up again, they wakened no response. Then, all at once, something did fix them in my mind, and when they met my eye once more, they were there behind it, so to speak, to recognize themselves when they appeared. There had been set up in my brain, as it were, by each of them, a magnetic centre, ready to catch and attract its like.

Now one of the things which the process we call education ought to do, and by no means always does, is to establish in the mind as many as possible of these magnetic centres — live spots, which thrust out tentacles of association, and catch and draw to themselves their kind. For there are few joys in reading like the joy of the chase. And the joy of the chase comes largely through the action of these centres of association in your brain. Let me illustrate what I mean, and since first-hand experience imparts a certain vividness which abstract theorizing lacks, let me use myself as a *corpus vile*, and draw for a moment upon that.

Years ago, like everybody who was interested in Chaucer, I was puzzled by a mysterious reference to 'the dry sea and the Carrenar.' There was no Carrenar that anybody knew —

nor, for that matter, any assured dry sea. One day, as I was reading in an old battered volume of *Purchas his Pilgrimes* which is one of my choicest treasures, I was struck by the recurrence in a number of Central-Asian place-names, of the prefix *Kara*. But none of them had the termination *nar*. Might they offer, however, a possible clue? So I asked that one among my colleagues who is an adept in all outlandish tongues, what the combination Kara-nar would mean in any language which he knew. The instant answer was: Black Lake. The rest of the long tale I shall not tell. Suffice it to say that there was and is a lake called Kara-nor; that it lay and lies off the great ancient trade-route between Orient and Occident, travelled in Chaucer's time; and that the lake is on the edge of a vast and terrible desert which was and is, in name and character, a veritable dry sea. And the sole reason of my mention of the business here is this: Had the crux of the Carrenar not been very much alive in my head, I might have seen a thousand Kara's in the travel-books without a thrill, and so have missed the most fascinating exploration — barring two — I ever undertook. And these other two came about in precisely the same way: through the recogni-

tion as I read of something which suggested, through a likeness recognized, the solution of a puzzle which had found a lodgment in my mind, and which was there, once more, to recognize its like, when, without warning, its like turned up. I cannot lay too strong an emphasis upon the sort of pleasure which results from the constant recognition in what one reads of things which link themselves, often in endlessly suggestive fashion, with things one has already read, till old friends with new faces meet us at every turn, and flash sudden light, and waken old associations, and quicken the zest for fresh adventures. To read with alert intellectual curiosity is one of the keenest joys of life, and it is pleasure which too many of us needlessly forgo.

Moreover, the dullest reading — and the world is full of very, very dull books, our share of which we are doomed to read as we are destined to meet our quota of bores in flesh and blood — the dullest books may become potential Ophirs and Golcondas, if we are looking for something as we read. If you know, every time you turn a page, that the thing you are looking for may leap to meet you on the next dull page, the task becomes an enthralling quest.

There are few things more deadly in the world than the vast bulk of fourteenth-century French courtly verse. To read it just to read it — as we are in the habit of reading books — would bore the blithest spirit to extinction. Yet (to be personal again for the sake of first-hand testimony) I have read interminable masses of it again and again, each time with the sense of an adventure waiting beyond the next turn of the road, because each time I was on the trail of game — some clue, some corroboration of a guess, some evidence for this or that, which I hoped that I might find. Sometimes I have found it, sometimes not; but in any case the pages had the charm of a desert island in which at any moment one might stumble upon signs of buried gold. I remember one rapid reading of numerous volumes in search of examples of a certain phrase which had uncommonly engaging implications. I found them — but that was only half the game. For on almost every page all sorts of other things kept starting up, which fitted in with this, or which illuminated that — some of them of far more intrinsic value than the elusive trifle which I was tracking; and so the fly-leaves of my books were steadily filling, as I read, with references to still more fruitful

possibilities for further explorations. And that leads me to say two things.

In the first place, one cannot begin too soon to buy one's own books, if for no other reason (and there are many more) than the freedom which they give you to use their fly-leaves for your own private index of those matters in their pages which are particularly yours, whether for interest, or information, or what not — those things which the index-makers never by any possibility include. To be able to turn at will, in a book of your own, to those passages which count for *you*, is to have your wealth at instant command, and your books become a record of your intellectual adventures, and a source of endless pleasure when you want, as you will, to turn back to the things which have given delight, or stirred imagination, or opened windows, in the past.

That is one point. The other is this. Goethe observed to Eckermann one day, in those *Conversations* which constitute one of the most thought-provoking volumes in the world: 'You know, Saul the son of Kish went out one day to find his father's asses, and found a kingdom.' Which is a parable. For it is when you are looking for one thing as you read — it may be some

utterly trivial affair — that ten to one you come upon the unexpected thing, the big or thrilling thing, which opens up new worlds of possibilities. Most of our discoveries — even if, as usually happens, they are discoveries only to us — are made when we are hot on the trail of something else. For because we are looking, we see, and we see more than we look for, because the eye which scans the page is actively alert to everything. And the more you *have* — the more live cluster-points of association there are in your brain — the more you see, and reading becomes a *cumulative* delight. 'The dear good people,' said Goethe once, 'don't know how long it takes to learn to read. I've been at it eighty years, and can't say yet that I've reached the goal.' One never does. There are always, as one goes on reading, unpath'd waters, undream'd shores ahead. And that is the secret of its perennial delight.

IV

One reads for the sheer enjoyment of it; one reads to learn; and there is a yet more excellent way. 'Man *lernt* nichts,' said Goethe of Winkelmann, 'wenn man ihn liest, aber man *wird* etwas' — 'you don't *learn* anything when you read

him, but you *become* something.' That strikes to the very root of things, for it puts into one pregnant phrase the supreme creative influence in the world — the contagious touch of great personalities. And if a good book is, in truth, as Milton in a noble passage once declared, 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life,' then that creative influence of life on life is in the book, and as we read, our spirit is enriched and grows, and we *become* something. We are just a little ashamed these days, I know, in our reaction from a certain sort of cant, to read for our soul's sake, or our spirit's sake, or for edification, in the fine old sense of a sadly misused word. We feel, somehow, that it isn't quite the thing. Well, I don't care at all what terms you use; but we are more than intellect, and more than sense, and the deepest-lying springs of life are touched by life alone. And the men who have lived, and learned through living, and won through life a wide and luminous view — these men have the imperishable creative power of broadening, deepening, and enhancing life. They are the true humanists, and humanism, as I take it, is the development, not of scholars, not of philosophers, or scientists, or specialists in

this or that, but of human beings. Goethe was such a humanist, and Goethe, by practice, not by precept, has pointed out the way.

'I read every year,' he said, 'a few plays of Molière, just as I also, from time to time, look over the engravings of the great Italian masters. For we little men aren't capable of maintaining within us the greatness of such things, and we have always to keep turning back to them from time to time, in order to quicken within us our impressions.' 'To-day after dinner,' wrote Eckermann — and this sort of thing happened again and again — 'Goethe went through the portfolio of Raphael with me. He busies himself with Raphael very often, in order to keep himself always in touch with the best, and to exercise himself continually in thinking the thoughts of a great spirit after him.' And this, mind you, was not a preacher, or a teacher, or a reformer, but the most puissant, richly endowed spirit of the modern world. Beyond delight, and beyond intellectual adventure, there is the spiritual contagion of great books.

And again I should like to be very practical, for we live in a busy world. Matthew Arnold once wrote in a letter, while he was off inspecting schools: 'I enjoy my time here very much. I

read five pages of Greek anthology every day, looking out all the words I do not know' — a very comforting remark, that last, for some of us. 'This,' he goes on, 'is what I shall always understand by *education*, and it does me good, and gives me great pleasure.' And the secret of his practice comes out in another letter, written this time to a British working man: 'As to useful knowledge, a single line of poetry, working in the mind, may produce more thoughts and lead to more light, which is what man wants, than the fullest acquaintance (to take your own instance) with the processes of digestion.' I am not sure, indeed, that anything which Arnold left is of more worth than his little, narrow, vest-pocket notebooks, which extend over a period of thirty-seven years. They served, not only for his record of engagements, but also as a repository for those passages of his daily reading which, in his own words, were 'working in his mind' — those passages through pondering on which (to use Montaigne's phrase) he *forged*, instead of merely *furnishing*, his soul. The entries for a dozen years have been printed, in a precious volume, by his daughter, and they exemplify, as nothing else I know can do, the sort of reading which I now have in mind — that reading through which

'man *wird* etwas.' I take nothing back of what I have said of reading as a delightful intellectual adventure. But this is different — yet not so different after all. 'I had an idea,' wrote Keats in one of his letters,

> that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner — let him on a certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose, and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it, until it becomes stale — but when will it do so? Never. When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect, any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-point towards all 'the two-and-thirty Palaces.'

Well, there before you are the palaces and the road thereto. I don't know where, for you, they are; I only know they are there.

We have no shrines, most of us, any more — we Protestant-Puritan-Pagan-Anglo-Saxon Occidentals — no tranquil Buddhas or symbols of the passion by the roadside, no solemn temples, few cool, silent churches, always open and inviting to withdrawal for a moment from the hurly-burly of the world. It is not my business to determine whether that means loss or gain. But one thing it is always in our power to do — to withdraw now and then from the periphery to

the centre, from the ceaseless whirl of the life that streams and eddies round us to the deep serenity of those great souls of better centuries ('ces grandes âmes des meilleurs siècles'), who give — and the lines sum up the antidote to the sick hurry of to-day — who give

> Authentic tidings of invisible things;
> Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
> And central peace, subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation.

THE END

Boston Public Library
Central Library, Copley Square

Division of
Reference and Research Services

The Date Due Card in the pocket indicates the date on or before which this book should be returned to the Library.

Please do not remove cards from this pocket.

AUG 2 1930